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M/E/A/N/I/N/G #3

CONTENTS

- 3 Florine Stettheimer: Eccentric Power,
Invisible Tradition *Pamela Wye*
- 13 The Art School Can Be a Research Workshop
or the Hotbed of Consumer Orthodoxy *Lucio Pozzi*
- 18 Some Remarks on Racism
in the American Arts *Daryl Chin*
- 26 What Is Divided? *Charles Bernstein*
- 30 Stella, the Star — No. 2 *Corinne Robins*
- 31 The Poetics of Basketry:
Art in a Tribal Context *David M. Guss*
- 38 Letter to the Editors *Richard Artschwager*
- 38 Contributors

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FLORINE STETTHEIMER: ECCENTRIC POWER, INVISIBLE TRADITION

PAMELA WYE

Florine Stettheimer is an invisible artist. Invisible by virtue of her near total absence from our collective art historical memory. But her invisibility is not an isolated occurrence. There are other artists who can be thought of as part of a tradition of invisibility. Naive artists, folk artists, insane artists, or minority artists all work outside the field flood-lit by art history. Stettheimer, however, was not innocent about the "major" aesthetic preoccupations of her time, nor was she naive about the ambitions of "high art" in general or of her ambitions in particular. Yet despite first-rate artistic power, she continues to circle around the periphery of art history. Stettheimer flirted with the idea of her own invisibility in a particularly striking way: she talked periodically of being buried in a mausoleum with all her paintings. Today, it is only somewhat easier to see her paintings than if her burial plans had been carried out — most of her work is buried in the storage basements and back offices of museums and colleges across America.

Currently three Stettheimer paintings are on view in New York City. Thanks to a revisionist breeze making itself felt in the curatorial sphere of the art world, "Family Portrait No. 2" (1933) is hanging in the Museum of Modern Art's permanent collection, and "Cathedrals of Broadway" (ca. 1929) and "Cathedrals of Art" (unfinished at the artist's death in 1944) are hanging in the Metropolitan Museum's new 20th Century Wing. However, it is tantalizingly frustrating to know that Columbia University is in possession of a bequest of 70 works (including early, transitional, and landmark works) and yet they are without a museum in which to publicly display them. Consequently, they are wrapped and hidden in the storage basement.

Stettheimer was born in Rochester, New York in 1871 to a wealthy banking family. She studied at the Art Students League between 1892 and 1895, and from 1906 until 1914 traveled and studied in Europe. In 1916 she had her only one-person exhibition at Knoedler Gallery, New York. She joined the Independent Society of Artists in 1917 and participated in their annual exhibitions until 1926. In 1923 Carl Springhorn offered her an exhibition at New Gallery, and in 1930 Alfred Stieglitz invited her to exhibit at An American Place, but she declined both offers. She preferred to show her new work at "unveiling parties" she hosted for such friends and sup-

porters as Marcel Duchamp, Elie Nadelman, Alfred Stieglitz, Gaston La-chaise, and Francis Picabia. In 1929, at the invitation of the composer Virgil Thomson, Stettheimer designed the sets and costumes for Gertrude Stein's "Four Saints in Three Acts." In 1932 she was included in the Whitney Museum's "First Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting," and in MoMA's "Modern Works of Art" exhibition. Again in 1939 and 1942 she was included in group exhibitions at MoMA. She died in 1944. In 1946 the Museum of Modern Art mounted a posthumous Stettheimer exhibition for which Marcel Duchamp served as Guest Director.

The "invisible tradition" of which Stettheimer is a part, consists of art which, for various reasons, stands outside the mainstream. This art generally is not solidly allied with any one of those major historical movements that occupy our consciousness like armored tanks. Rather, the work stands eccentrically — that is, outside the center — to the art world's prevailing trends. The prevailing aesthetics are either stood on their head, twisted and modified to fit personal ends, or simply ignored. As a result, the work is branded by its singularity. The individual artist's peculiar mixing together of trends and influences is his or her way to personalize form and content. It reveals a predilection for using the individual personality as the major filter and driving force of the art. This art is so strongly identified with the self that it often functions for the artist as an alter-ego.

We can think of these eccentric artists as heroes and heroines of individualism, standing as they do alone and susceptible to invisibility. Or we can see them as careless strategists, heedless of the future — artists so caught up in their private visual dream that they failed to devise strategies for immortality. As a result, first class inclusion in the pantheon of art history has eluded them, even after death. These artists have not got their due by today's standards of recognition. Is it their fault? Is it self-willed? Or did time, once it grasped the essential nature of the artist and the art, take off on its own, elaborating their future from an initial soil impregnated with their eccentricity and independence, and out of which their invisibility took seed and grew and grew, out of the artist's reach? This is a terrifying fate to consider for those with an affinity to this independent sensibility. To be forgotten, misunderstood, ignored, or unjustly left out. What could be worse? Yet it is precisely these qualities, this emptiness, hole, lacuna, and need, which have the power to attract and fascinate. The need for closure, completion, and vindication is, luckily, irresistible for some people; it energizes and galvanizes those who want to overcome it, turn it around. The invisible artist seems to attract the imagination of a few such people, who take up their cause and try to pierce through the thick growth of their invisibility with the fervor of one whose own destiny depended on it.

* * *

Florine Stettheimer is an alternately emerging and retreating artist. For years she has been surfacing and disappearing with teasing ambivalence. Today, we are accustomed to bulletins advising us of the imminent emergence of some unknown artist or artists currently working. Stettheimer, on the contrary, is tortuously emerging, not from the haze of that future about which we hear many predictions, but from the clearly delineated and well-lit past. That past, which seems definitively resolved can prove to be mutable and capable of offering up surprises.

Artists whose work is invisible, by definition, are not important figures in art history. The word "important" is not used here, nor is it ever used, innocently. "Important" is a highly charged code word which serves as the nucleus around which reputations spin. To be "Important" means not to be overlooked, to be big, serious, and influential — something to write home about — or, quite simply, to write about.

There is an obsessive desire on the part of forces in the art world to jump start art history with pronouncements of "important" new works, shows, artists, trends. It is a treacherous machine that tries to force feed art history with premature pronouncements of "importance." It often uses the artists it exalts as fuel to keep itself turning — consuming and discarding many of those artists in the process. The mischievous handiwork of this machine is of two sorts. It can puff up reputations that are at best premature, and at worst undeserved; and it can shrink to invisibility art which is inconvenient, marginal, or eccentric by simply and persistently ignoring it. In its attempt to manufacture art history, this machine decides not only how we see, but what we see. Part of Stettheimer's distinction and enigma lies in how invisible, and hence how "unimportant" she has remained.

Supporters of Stettheimer have often returned to the subject of her near non-existent reputation as though to a conundrum, against which their only resource is to ponder the question of fame and visibility.

In 1931, Marsden Hartley took note of Stettheimer's isolation, and by proposing the sort of sensibility necessary to appreciate her work, spoke of the very qualities that made her work difficult for the art public, and consequently some of the reasons for her "respectable reticence:"

... I suppose no painter has been persistently permitted so much of refined obscurity as Miss Florine Stettheimer. . . In the case of Florine Stettheimer, the reasons are much too personal and special. . . This artist has wished apparently to remain the property of special friends. . . she has for one reason or another, and, I almost want to declare, not legitimately, elected to remain out of the great parade of esthetic effusion that makes up what is called the art season of New York from year to year. The painting of Florine Stettheimer does not. . . belong to the concert hall, it is distinctly chamber music meant to be heard by special, sympathetic ears; . . . [it] implies a definite degree of cultivation

in the spectator in order to enjoy its . . . most whimsical charm, it implies that one must wish for ultra-refined . . . experience in order to enjoy what it contains. . . . [she is] the one artist of today whose works are permeated first of all with delicate and captivating feminine humor. . . . It is the ultra-lyrical expression of an ultra-feminine spirit, and must be considered as such if one is to enjoy the degree it is meant to convey.¹

In the catalog accompanying MoMA's 1946 Stettheimer retrospective organized by Marcel Duchamp, Henry McBride wrote:

Fame is the most uncertain garment man assumes. No one knows exactly how to acquire it nor how to keep it once acquired. . . . Yet fame, apparently, is what the Museum of Modern Art now desires for the late Florine Stettheimer.²

And in 1973, on the occasion of a Columbia University exhibition, Hilton Kramer wrote of Stettheimer's work:

. . . a little campy, a little bizarre, yet extremely powerful in its pictorial effect. . . . One can only hope, indeed, that the Columbia exhibition will turn out to be only the first step in the rediscovery of this remarkable American artist.³

So why, in 1988, is Florine Stettheimer still "permitted so much. . . refined obscurity. . ."? One possibility may be that the forces that solidify an artists's reputation are market forces. Stettheimer's attitude toward fame can best be described as one of ambivalence. Her attitude toward the market, in contrast, seems more clear-cut. She didn't need the money that sales could bring; and as Linda Nochlin pointed out in 1980, although a feminist, she cultivated both in her work and her life a language and a persona of ultra-femininity and ephemerality. Neither of these qualities could provide a strong base from which to make inroads into the top ranks of an art world that at best did little to encourage its "lady painters."

Stettheimer's ultra-feminine stance is indicative of the larger picture of her solution to the problem of forging an identity as a woman artist. She and her family were independently wealthy. Her father abandoned the family early on, and later when the two eldest children "abandoned" the family for marriage, the mother and the three unmarried daughters, Florine, Ettie, and Carrie, stayed together in a tightly self-sufficient and nurturing matriarchy — "an inseparable quartet."⁴ In life, her persona was something of a cloistered virgin. And in her paintings, the image she gave herself, as well as the devices she used to frame her scenes, reveal a tendency to play with the issues of visibility and invisibility.

Curtains and drapery often frame the scenes within Stettheimer's paintings. In addition to being a decorative framing element, curtains embody a duality. They conceal when drawn; and they reveal when parted. Revealing and concealing are alternating tendencies that are at work in

both the life and oeuvre of Stettheimer. In "George Washington in New York" a feminine hand at the bottom left corner holds back the curtain that frames the left side of the painting to reveal the central scene. In "Spring Sale" (1921) not only is the curtain on the right and left edges of the painting pulled back as on a stage, to reveal the riotous shopping and trying on of clothes, but one woman at the bottom right has wrapped the corner of the curtain around herself in a gesture of modesty and concealment vis-a-vis the man who stands just on the other side of the same curtain. In her portraits, Stettheimer often uses the parted curtain as a way to reveal her subject standing on center stage, as in "Portrait of My Sister Carrie W. Stettheimer with Doll's House," or as a device to frame a distant scene from the past, as the lace curtains frame the young Stettheimer children in the deep background of the portrait of the aging Mrs. Stettheimer in "Portrait of My Mother," (1925).

The subject of many of Stettheimer's paintings are the parties given by her family "which were enjoyed by artists and writers and dancers of their acquaintance. . . ."⁵ And in her life as in her paintings "she was frequently inconspicuous."⁶ In "Sunday Afternoon in the Country," (1917) the artist portrays herself nearly hidden, deep in the garden in the right-hand background of the painting. With her face concealed by a big hat, she works at an easel which we see only from the back. Distanced from the social gathering, she appears to observe it. Interestingly, accordingly to the writer Carl Van Vechten, a close friend of the Stettheimer's and an habitue of their gatherings, she never painted while a party was going on. "She invariably contrived her paintings without visible models. . . ."⁷ So this image of her is not a recording of fact, but rather the representation of a persona. Stettheimer frequently made use of analogs in her portraits. She surrounded her subject with people, words, and objects that by association helped to represent something essential about their personality. Therefore it is significant to note that belying the image of modesty, reserve, and professional dedication with which she sought to portray herself in this painting, she has painted a red satyr crouching close by her side. The riotous merriment and lechery with which such woodland dieties are associated complicates our reading of her as the aloof spinster, yet supports our intimation of her capacity for sensuality and passion. And since the satyr appears with Florine the painter, one can venture a guess that she is acknowledging to us that painting is the arena for the expression of her dionysian nature.

Stettheimer's spinster image as put forth in her paintings seems to embody something of the self-centeredness of prepubescence. Prepubescence is that pause in late childhood when one is independent of the life-giving mother yet still innocent of that violent yearning for the Other where self-centeredness gives way to self-forgetfulness, and one is drawn to and

drowns in the reality of an other being in sexual love. In prepubescence one is self-possessed and untouchable — one's sensuous experience of the world is one's alone. In "Picnic at Bedford Hills", (1918) Stettheimer pictures herself alone and off to the side of the other members of her party which consist of two paired couples — she is literally the odd woman out. Elie Nadelman appears to be wooing a recumbent Ettie while Marcel Duchamp helps Carrie set out the picnic. Ettie is lying flat on her back, with her arms bent up under her head in a pose which, if not exactly provocative, is one of openness, and receptivity. In contrast, Florine is portrayed sitting upright, closed in on herself, her arms hugging her body, her legs pulled up under her, clutching her parasol close, she looks away from the others, alone in her thoughts. She is the picture of self-containment. And again, in "Lake Placid" (1919) we have the picture of many friends of the artist's family clad in bathing suits, swimming, diving, lounging, and water skiing, clearly given over to the voluptuous pleasures of summer. Florine, in contrast, paints herself in the extreme foreground, fully clothed in what appears a long-sleeved coat and a big-brimmed hat. Again, she is closed in on herself, her arms hugging her body, her face turned away from the joyous crowd. She appears to be sneaking timidly down the stairs, wishing to pass by alone and unnoticed.

Stettheimer knew, and was able to cultivate, the conditions in which her work could thrive — privacy, if not isolation. This is borne out by what we know of her social persona as well as by her peculiar and very personal manner of "getting her work out." Her preferred vehicle for showing a new work was not the impersonal space of a commercial gallery, but the "unveiling party" that she and her family hosted in their home for a select but choice group of supporters. The dinners, picnics, soirees, and unveiling parties that figure so prominently in her paintings were attended by such artists as Duchamp, Nadelman, Hartley, Lachaise, Picabia, O'Keeffe, Steichen, McBride, and Thomson. Stettheimer felt her work looked best in its home environment. In fact, the decor of her home and studio was an environmental creation on which she spent much time and energy. The fringed canopies, the elaborate wall coverings, the drapings of cellophane and lace, the arrangements of crystal flowers, the white and gold furniture paralleled her paintings in their opulence and eccentricity. "The studio itself was one of the curiosities of the town; and very related, in appearance, to the work that was done in it."⁸

Belying her apparent lack of careerism, however, is the prominence in which she figures in her last major painting, and her ultimate statement on The New York Art World, "Cathedrals of Art." "Cathedrals of Art" is one of the four paintings in the series begun in 1929 known as "The Cathedral Series", which also includes "Cathedrals of Broadway," "Cathedrals of Fifth Avenue," and "Cathedrals of Wall Street." Together

they represent the most ambitious and comprehensive expression of her social/satirical vision. Stettheimer was a gifted and astute writer. She kept journals and wrote poems that evoke the visual world of her paintings as well as elaborate and develop her somewhat hermetic symbolism. A collection of her poems, *Crystal Flowers*, was published posthumously by her sister. Words as visual forms as well as conveyors of meaning also figure prominently in many of her paintings. For example, in the upper left corner of "Cathedrals of Art," written against the sky are the names of three painters — somewhat obscurely "Bouguereau," "Picasso" (written twice perhaps to reflect his ubiquitous presence), and "Florine St" (written half backwards so as not to be too easily deciphered — as it wouldn't do to be too obvious about one's true ambition and sense of worth). In the lower right corner, Stettheimer has painted herself waving to us, amused and happy, literally off to the side of the busy, preoccupied and specifically identified art crowd. She is further separated from the scene by her enclosure within one of her characteristic cocoon constructions of rich fabric embellished with gold fringe and intertwining flowers. One could surmise that behind her demure person lies a core of intense ambition and pride.

Further complicating Stettheimer's chances of recognition is that she appears at first glance not to be "serious". People often react to an initial encounter with a Stettheimer painting with a laugh. She entertains us. We can't quite believe what we see. The peculiarity of her forms and her subject matter renders them invisible at first to uninitiated eyes. One might initially brush her off as too frivolous for serious involvement. One can catch in her oeuvre if not an essential core, then a glimmer of a Camp sensibility. Linda Nochlin in "Florine Stettheimer: Roccoco Subversive,"⁹ directs us to Susan Sontag's seminal article on Camp. In "Notes on 'Camp'"¹⁰ Sontag says: "The whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious. . . . One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious."¹¹ This Camp twist to frivolity and seriousness is borne out in this work. Far from being simply frivolous, her specific forms, her compositions, and her sensibility as it makes itself known from painting to painting exude an intense mental, psychic, and sensual life. In making the fascinating leap from her highly competent though academic early work to her extremely personal mature style, Stettheimer embodied another Sontag definition of Camp, "The discovery of the good taste of bad taste can be very liberating."¹²

Humor is a serious matter. Yet, it is something of a taboo in high art. ". . . It is a fabulous little world of two-dimensional shapes with which she entertains us."¹³ Today the word "entertainment" elicits images of junk food for the mind and soul — empty, ultimately unsatisfying divertissement. After a dose of average TV entertainment, for example, one often

feels depleted, irritated, sad. With Stettheimer, on the contrary, one feels vivified. Like a breeze through the brain, hers is not broad humor, but rather a sort of visual and mental tickling. Entertainment in the hands of Stettheimer is a strategy of seduction.

A formal discussion of Stettheimer's work may begin with Sontag's reference to Camp's "... extraordinary feeling for artifice, for surface. . . [for] the flourish. . ."¹⁴ She could be writing about Stettheimer's lusciously built-up surfaces, her unearthly sweet colors, her serpentine and wavy lines that proliferate and intertwine not only in her bouquets and ferns and foliage, but in the draping curtains, flags, and banners, the elaborate robes and dresses of lace and fringe, and the plumes and tassels and wrought iron that animate her paintings. This world of artifice is seen in equal measure with irony and with love. In her work there is "... a sense of the poetry and humor and pathos of what is merely embellishing. . ."¹⁵ The ironic distance with which she views her world can be thought of as the result of thinking with the head. However, the cerebral quality is counterbalanced by a sensuality that could be called thinking with the body. The subject matter of a Stettheimer painting is never overtly sexual, and yet despite the androgynous and stylized forms her figures have taken, they, and the compositions as a whole, seem to be the shape of desire and yearning. The paint surface, the heightened color, and the forms combine to create in the paintings hot spots of radiance, of intense and excessive pleasure bordering on ecstasy, intoxication, and a mystical hedonism. This sensuality is most intense in the enigmatic/poetic paintings such as "Music" (c. 1920), "Natatorium Undine" (1927), and at its most direct in the "Hearth Screen" (n.d.) presently in Columbia University's storage basement.

In contrast to her social/satirical work, the enigmatic/poetic work stuns by its ultra-personal, though oblique, content. "Hearth Screen" is a highly refined example of this. The "Hearth Screen" is an actual screen used to hide the fireplace. It consists of a canvas (28" x 60") inserted into a standing frame with Chinese carved and gild wood panels. The painting is in oil, with forms built up in plaster and impasto, painted with silver and gold paint, and with tiny beads and sequins (some now missing) imbedded in the paint. The closed, self-contained shapes so typical of Stettheimer are seen here clearly as figures, flowers, and hanging forms against an uncharacteristically austere white ground. It is a frontal, direct and simple piece, without deep physical space, but with the left to right surface space characteristic of hieroglyphics and pictographs, or of writing. The composition is spare and eloquent and has a visual tension which results from everything being in just the right place. This appears to be quite different from the overwhelming abundance of forms and lines in much of Stettheimer's work, however, it is a pared-down example of the stunning judiciousness of her sense of placement and pictorial coherence. The restraint

of this piece underscores, by its difference, its voluptuousness of feeling and tension parallel in feeling to a state of feminine sexual love. Not only the formal aspects of "Hearth Screen," but also the subject matter alludes to and evokes a vision of the way love feels in the body as well as in the soul of a woman. One is struck at first by the organic, implicitly erotic forms of the oversized flowers and shapes that float and hang within the painting. The shapes are very primal in their earthy colors of brown, sienna, gold, and silver, with rich, blood red interiors and details. They are built up with plaster which emphasizes their physicality. Connecting all these shapes is a very delicate, quivering, wandering line, seemingly sensitive to the movement of the hand and the soul of she who traced it. Like a single finger tracing a line over a beloved body, it travels a great distance in some places, while in other places it twirls and loops around in playful flourishes. It draws an exquisite tension. The oversized, hanging, and floating shapes that dominate the surface of this painting are of four sorts. The loosely oval flowers with rich red centers; the hanging, drooping lampshade and heart- and bell-shaped flowers; the length of unfurled scroll and fringe that occupy the two upper corners; and the single masculine shape at the extreme right. The distribution of shapes alone suggests a female harem with a single male presence. The swirling earthiness of these shapes speaks of a visceral source; they seem to originate in the body, as approximations of something felt there. Their dripping, bulging, hanging heaviness corresponds to that heavy feeling in the womb that is felt in sexual longing. All these forms are attached to the sensitive tendril/line that wanders through the painting as though to the larger nervous system that connects them to the rest of the body/person.

There are three female figures who stand balanced on this tendril without the least amount of difficulty. Yet the very nature of their perch implies a fragility, a temporary and insubstantial footing. The central figure is shy and self-contained and firmly grounded at the bottom center of the painting. She is shrouded in a black shawl that covers her from head to waist and frames and emphasizes her face and her tremulous, timid and even fearful eyes. The female at the left, on the contrary, fixes us with a bold, seductive gaze. Dressed in an exotic gold tunic and headdress, with her face framed by a scarf of vibrant red, she seems a figure from a harem in a pose of proud display. The figure at the right is the most active; she appears to be in the thrall of a sensuous dance, her body defines a sort of arabesque. She too is dressed in gold, with harem pants, a high cone head-dress with a scarf that trails down to her feet, and the train of her tunic also trails down so that the two trains meet and take on a life of their own, snaking around each other. Most amazingly, there is, balanced at the end of one of these tails, behind the female's back, another oversized shape, which upon inspection reveals itself to be not a round feminine flower with a red vaginal center, but rather a shape highly evocative of a male

penis and testicles. And it is towards this shape that the female's head and mesmerized gaze are turned as a partner in a dance. These three female figures propose three different responses to a feminine sexuality — shy self-containment, perhaps even fear and withdrawal; proud self-display, almost object-like; and active, enthralled engagement. They can be read as three distinct personalities (one hesitates to suggest the three Stettheimer sisters) or possibly as three aspects of one woman.

In concluding, one can step back from the individual works and look again at the problem of Florine Stettheimer's invisibility and note that there is a tremendous amount to be gained by keeping the curtain back on her work for longer than the flash of a glimpse. And despite the obvious charm, for the solitary devotee, of doggedly tracking down her work, one can hope that the time has come for a full-scale, out-in-the-open examination and appreciation of her oeuvre.

Notes

1. Marsden Hartley, "The Paintings of Florine Stettheimer," *Creative Art*, v. 9, July 1931, pp. 19, 22. It is significant that this piece was not republished in the 1982 collection of Hartley's writing, *On Art*, edited by Gail R. Scott.
2. Henry McBride, *Florine Stettheimer* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1946), p. 9.
3. Hilton Kramer, "Stettheimer Paintings Are Revived," *The New York Times*, Feb. 20, 1973, p. 22.
4. Carl Van Vechten, "The World of Florine Stettheimer," *Harper's Bazaar*, v. 79, Oct. 1946, p. 238.
5. Van Vechten, p. 354.
6. Van Vechten, p. 354.
7. Van Vechten, p. 355.
8. McBride, p. 24.
9. Linda Nochlin, "Florine Stettheimer: Rococo Subversive," *Art in America*, v. 68, no. 7, Sept. 1980, pp. 64-83.
10. Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp'," 1964, In *Against Interpretation And Other Essays*, (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1966), pp. 275-292.
11. Sontag, p. 288.
12. Sontag, p. 291.
13. Paul Rosenfeld, "Art: The World of Florine Stettheimer," *Nation*, v. 134, May 4, 1931, pp. 522-23 as quoted in McBride, p. 53.
14. Sontag, p. 280.
15. Rosenfeld, *ibid*.

Further Reading

Florine Stettheimer Still Lifes, Portraits and Pageants 1910 to 1942. Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, Massachusetts. With an essay by Elizabeth Sussman. Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1980.

Florine Stettheimer: An Exhibition of Paintings, Watercolors, Drawings. Low Memorial Library, Columbia University, New York. New York: Columbia University, 1973.

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THE ART SCHOOL CAN BE A RESEARCH WORKSHOP OR THE HOTBED OF CONSUMER ORTHODOXY

LUCIO POZZI

The art school is an integral part of artistic discourse. It is not a neutral preparatory ground for the learning of a skill but it is the place where permanent critical exchange happens among the student body, the instructors, the administrators, and the public at large.

To become a probing instrument of cultural research, the art school ought to reflect three sides of artistic endeavour: technique, history, context — the premises for any imaginative thrust. Most art schools will claim that those are precisely the parameters they stress in their curricula. Yet it can be useful to reiterate what these functions of art mean in our culture.

The only way technique, history, and context can become tools for creative research is to consider them within a global and relativistic view of the living experience. Otherwise each of them slips into becoming a restrictive specialty exclusive of the other two and a restraint to art.

Indeed, far too many times in the recent past we have witnessed art being hinged upon *only* technique¹ (whether it be painting impasto or electronic media makes no difference in this respect) or *only* history² (nostalgia for the past or fiction for the future) or *only* context³ (linguistic, environmental, or sociological emphasis being exaggerated).

The thoughtful artist lends great importance to technique, but does not fasten his/her work to it alone as a gauge for better artistic development. The craft of making, or even of planning for fabrication by third parties, is a flexible function of art. It feeds into and results from the lonesome thought process of the artist's mind. The artist never fetishizes technical data but assesses instead the conditions within which those data present themselves in the process of making.

History is a reference. It is a dictionary of forms and an encyclopedia of thought processes. But it is essential that the artist be aware of the fact that all forms and thoughts previously developed never happened in a vacuum but always within social/economic evolutionary conditions, not repeatable in the present time. One can not ignore history because part of it is registered inside us. One assesses what history's traces are in one's memory at the time and place one is working in.

Art is in dialogue with its context. It is not dependent on it nor is it independent from it. Art is an integral part of the larger cultural discourse. A deterministic view of experience denies the artist's individual creative power and interprets it as being subject to binding contextual forces, seen as separate, outside of it. A more statistical view, instead, looks upon art as a creative field ranging widely in its contextual organism, where sometimes this or sometimes that of the available possibilities is explored.

The relativistic view of art, when implemented in the art school, stresses process over product and doubt over certainty. The art school, when structured as a network of interacting forces, is an instrument for the development of creative and ever-regenerating decision-making processes, and thus does not necessitate that the students all become artists. It organizes their minds as well as those of the faculty into a way of thinking which can project itself in any situation of the world, not only art.

In modern research of all kinds, there is today a conflict between the more pedantic and the more probing outlooks. In science as in art we are currently dominated by mechanistic determinism. This is caused in part by the mental laziness that a rigid consumerism of both commercial products and ideological slogans drives us into.

The art school can contribute to the development of a dialectical culture critical of rigid forms of thinking.

The models for a critical art school can be traced in the tradition which goes from principles of the anti-authoritarian foundations of the United States of America⁴ through the short-lived experiments of the art schools (Vkhutemas)⁵ during the Russian Revolution and through certain aspects of the Bauhaus.⁶

A critical art school develops models of thinking which lead to an ever-renewed assessment of all assumptions a community takes for granted.

If an art school sustains, for instance, the concept that an artist should find an original style s/he can call his/her own and that this style should intentionally be different from that which has happened before it, that school promotes a static orthodoxy and a fatalistic outlook binding its practitioners to un-regenerative assumptions bent upon feeding a rigid short-cycle distribution market and discouraging a dialogue with history. By stressing style, but meaning quickly marketable cliché, that school trains its students to pursue apparent change while in actuality encouraging them to conform to the limited and limiting life of rushed novelty.

If, conversely, the art school fosters the risks of open research, of flexible methods and of permanent debate, not only will its members find their true originality⁷ outside the conformist tenets of topical programs of short-cycle consistency — in a global view of existence — but also the market, through which in our country the distribution of art must pass, might respond by acknowledging that it (the market) is indeed made of individuals who also are flexible creators in dialogue with one another.

Notes

1. It is not my purpose here to gossip about who indulges which technique and when. Lack of regeneration in the implementation of a skill or craft is experienced by many artists at various times in their career.
Yet one may notice how Jackson Pollock bailed out of his "all-over" dripping patterns as soon as he felt they had become a cliché, while others may never stop producing stained canvases, or juxtaposing photos to verbal slogans, or dripping paint on surfaces, or painting always in white or in black or in whatever, or rigorously displaying work always in rusty steel, and so on.
2. As for history, Pollock took the dripping technique Andre Masson had developed early in this century as an 'automatic' method of visual thought, and changed it around to serve purposes of process exploration and environmental impact. Others instead just plainly lift from the historical dictionary this or that imagery as an exercise in stylistic revivalism. Yet others pursue projections of novelty for its own sake, equally lacking in critical substance.
3. Finally, some of the most unchallenging art has been produced in earnestness and good faith by artists concerned with the corruption of traditional processes such as painting and sculpture. As an alternative, they have stressed those ingredients of art which are kept hidden in painting and sculpture: the placement of an object, the surroundings of art viewing, the reception of art, the underlying ideology of an artistic mode, and so on. This was a creative step to take, as it not only made explicit the literary, the environmental, the sociological in art, but also enlarged its horizon.
But then, many have become prisoners of the exclusive didactic attitudes they had promoted, denying legitimacy to painting as such, and losing all ambiguity in their art — eventually developing even more conformity than is found in that which they had originally reacted against (I am thinking of much 'conceptual' art in this respect).
4. "... a wise and frugal government, which shall restrain men from injuring one another, which shall leave them otherwise free to regulate their own pursuits of industry and improvement, and shall not take from the mouth of labor the bread it has earned" — Thomas Jefferson's inaugural address. Quoted in: Fawn M. Brodie, *Thomas Jefferson*, (New York: Norton, 1974), p. 337.
5. "What is important to know about the character of the institution is that it was almost autonomous; it was both a school and a free academy where not only the teaching of special professions was carried out . . . but general discussions were held and seminars conducted amongst the students on diverse problems where the public could participate, and artists not officially on the faculty could speak and give lessons. It had an audience of several thousand students There was a free exchange between workshops and also the private studios such as mine During these seminars as well as during the general meetings, many ideological questions between opposing artists in our abstract group were thrashed out." Naum Gabo describing the Vkhutemas of 1918 in Moscow. Quoted in Camilla Gray, *The Russian Experiment in Art, 1863-1922*, (New York: Abrams, 1971), p. 232.
6. "Academic training, however, brought about the development of a great art-proletariat destined to social misery. For this art-proletariat, lulled into a dream of genius and enmeshed in artistic conceit, was being prepared for the "profession" of architecture, painting, sculpture or graphic art, without being

given the equipment of a real education — which alone could have assured it of economic and esthetic independence. Its abilities, in the final analysis, were confined to a sort of drawing-painting that had no relation to the realities of materials, techniques, or economics. Lack of all vital connection with the life of the community led inevitably to barren esthetic speculation." Walter Gropius in: "Idee und Aufbau des Staatlichen Bauhauses Weimar", 1923. Quoted in Herbert Bayer, Walter Gropius, Ise Gropius, *Bauhaus 1919-1928*, (Boston: Branford, 1959), p. 21.

7. There are several methodological keys I suggest to my students in this respect. Here are a few of them.

INSTRUMENTALIZATION. One of the simplest keys is instrumentalization of intention and completion.

Intentions are normally assumed to be binding guidelines for the artist. I prefer turning them into mere instruments to start an operation the end of which is considered to be unknown. They are like a take-off ramp, or a jumping board from which an unpredictable journey begins.

By the same token, I recommend suffering an excruciating doubt about completion — when is a work of art finished — rather than allowing oneself to conform to any pre-packaged standards of finishedness. In art, one does well to consider all possible ranges of finishedness as legitimate and consider them all again and again at every stage in the making of the situation one is setting up. As Paul Cezanne apparently has stated: "A painting is finished from the first brushstroke onwards."

ORIGINALITY. Do not seek originality. Assume you are original because you are yourself. Allow all influences you are receptive to, to filter into your art, do not censor them out. They are your dialogue with your times and with your memory.

STYLE. Do not attempt to pre-decide your 'personal style' but immerse yourself modestly and earnestly in the discourse of your culture. It is impossible for your works not to be marked by the style of your personality, which includes the time and place in which you operate. Instead of programming it, you will *find* your style as a sum total of your existence in history, and you yourself might never wholly know what it is (see Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, 1955).

THE NEW. Do not seek novelty. If you make the effort to become critically aware of your outer (social) and of your inner (psychic) contexts, this effort guarantees that you are of your present time, thus 'new' when compared to the past. Do not shun, however, past forms and concepts. They are inside you and to deny them would be repressive.

Consider your whole epoch as your operational field. Do not limit your attention only to the chronicle of the here and now. To leaf through old glossy art magazines — the tools of the here and now — one can but feel a melancholy compassion for the hundreds of artists who eagerly sought and had a short-lived fame in a narrow moment of history which they conquered by inventing 'styles' that were 'new and original' but emotionally shallow and socially insignificant.

REGENERATION. Regeneration is not a metaphysical matter: it happens in one's creative mind if one lets it. After doing something, one has no energy left for doing that again with the same intensity, but one is full of power for whatever appears to be 'other' than what one has just done. It is natural for

the mind to return ever to previously experienced families of information; while traveling from 'other' to 'other', the expanding spiral of experience develops. (See Lucio Pozzi, "Decisions," *New Observations* #27, 1985.)

CONSISTENCY. Do not seek consistency: it is impossible for any critically aware person not to be him/her self. We are currently dominated by a narrow and clichéd concept of consistency, one that leads to the dead-end of repetitious art. As it happens for style, one's consistency is revealed only in time.

RANGES. Rather than limiting your experience to a narrow scope, do conceive of all apparently irreconcilable operational polarities as poles of ranges upon which you may dial the various aspects of your art, as if using an editing console in a music concert. Sometimes there can be more abstraction, for instance, and less representation, some other times it might be the opposite. Sometimes there might be more topical meaning, some other times less, all according to the necessities of the operation you are conducting.

NETWORK. The network of the ranges you engage in, forms your art as a whole, and it too is not immediately recognized even by yourself.

SOME REMARKS ON RACISM IN THE AMERICAN ARTS

DARYL CHIN

About a year ago, I attended a lecture given by Faith Ringgold at San Diego State University. After her lecture, she answered questions from the students. Ringgold had mentioned that, during the past few years, her work has finally received considerable notice. One student asked her if she felt, when her work was reviewed, that her work was not looked at critically, but was categorized as "feminist" or "black" art.

Ringgold replied that, during the 1960s, there was the impression that alternatives to the art establishment could be created. But that was an illusion: there was only one art world. And the New York art world was not endless; it was, and is, a finite system. After a while in New York City, if you've gone to a few openings and the usual circuit of galleries and alternative spaces, you probably have met a large number of the people who comprise the art world. The point is that, if you are an alternative artist (non-white, female, gay, etc.), then you have to wait for the art world to acknowledge you. And there's not much that you can do about it. You have to continue working, and wait. When the art world establishment (which is white) decides to acknowledge you, it will.

Ringgold's argument was very provocative. I thought about what she had said during the summer of 1987, when a number of exhibitions (including the Whitney Biennial) promoted a new "movement" in art, which was being popularly dubbed "Neo-Geo" ("promotion" is the term that is appropriate). Yet, within that discourse during the summer of 1987, including major exhibitions, articles in everything from art journals to daily newspapers, and (perhaps most important in current parlance) the movement of merchandise (a.k.a. sales), there were many omissions. At the end of the summer, the Whitney Museum at the Equitable Building had an exhibition on trends in abstract art, and one omission was rectified, in that David Diao's work was represented. Diao, who, through his work as one of the advisors to the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program for the past decade, has been one of the primary influences on recent painting and sculpture, has not had the public recognition for his part in generating much of the discourse about the visual arts. In addition, his elegant considerations of Constructivist precursors have reasserted a discourse about the art object within an aesthetic of radicalization. His practice as a painter during the past decade has maintained a dichotomy be-

tween a reaffirmation of the commodity status of art and an acknowledgment of art's dematerialization, all the while resulting in a series of discreet and dynamic paintings encapsulating much of the history of modern abstract art. As artist and theorist, Diao has not had the recognition that he deserves. The quality of his work is not at issue; rather, the admission of the importance of a non-white artist in the context of the contemporary art world is one which is exceedingly difficult. Diao's inclusion in the popular discourse of current painting and sculpture is always qualified.

I think it is important to note the part that institutional support plays on behalf of minority artists. The art world is based on the system of the commercial galleries. The attempt to define alternatives which came about during the 1970s helped to establish the value of non-commodity art practices. The agenda of the alternative spaces was to provide a forum for art which was disenfranchised from the gallery system, and that included those whose works were not acknowledged within that system. Those disenfranchised included minority artists, women artists, and young artists. As an example, the feminist art movement of the past two decades defined an alternative system consisting of cooperative galleries, journals, courses and curricula at art schools and art institutes. Many women were able to establish career options through this alternative system. However, aside from a few women who have been established within the commercial system within the past decade, few women artists have been able to sustain their careers on a commercial level, that is, through the sale of their work. With minority artists, the mandate of many governmental funding agencies requires minority representation in terms of affirmative action. Though minority and women artists often find outlets in teaching, residencies, and grants, the exclusion of most of these artists from the commercial center of the art world effectively effaces their work. The commercial center has always defined a large part of the interest of art in modern times; the price of a work often becomes the factor involved in an assessment of that work. Notice how often auctions are discussed in the reportage on art. Notice, too, how rarely those prices reflect an aesthetic assessment, and how rarely works by minorities or women are featured in those auctions. From these indicators, is the assumption to be made that visual art work of worth is solely the province of the white male? The exclusion of most minority artists from the commercial center of the art world is one reason for the recourse that minority artists must take through the institutional framework. The institutional support to which I refer is part of that system of "alternatives": in short, the "feminist art world" and the "black art world" which Ringgold characterized as qualified in terms of the established art world.

In discussing the racial biases of the art establishment, there are always circumscribed answers, indicative of the ideological stranglehold of

establishment opinion. Returning to the situation of the past summer, the ascendancy of the "Neo-Geo" painters was highlighted by the fact that many of the artists were able to be represented by some of the most prestigious and the most profitable of the commercial galleries, most notably by Mary Boone and Sonnabend. Just to further the argument: David Diao is represented by Postmasters, one of the more stable galleries in the East Village, but a gallery which cannot command the prices accorded to work represented by Mary Boone or Sonnabend. Now, I am not suggesting in any way that the man is suffering. His position at the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program is secure; he has received numerous grants and awards; when he exhibits his paintings, he has always been able to sell his work for quite respectable sums. Of course, an argument could be made that Diao's work, which questions the ideology of abstraction, is maintaining integrity by the refusal to function in the arena of the inflated art market mentality. That might be true, but truth might also be served by the acknowledgement that Diao's work has not had access to the most commercial excesses of the art market. To be blunt: if an artist of similar age, operating in the same social system, equally influential for younger artists, such as Ross Bleckner, can achieve prices in the vicinity of \$100,000 for a painting, I do not think that David Diao can make the same claim (although his prices are by no means negligible). This discrepancy in terms of economic worth, a sure sign of merit in a capitalist culture, is accountable in one of two ways: either there is a difference attributable to the aesthetics of the work, or there is an ideology involving political and sociological difference which determines how work is seen. The abstraction of Diao's work is not seen as merely a function of abstraction, (the neutral "sign" of much "Neo-Geo" work), but is seen as the work of a specific person, and that person is not white. Some recent practitioners of abstract painting because of their representation by prominent galleries, have the possibility of their work being sold in the six-figure range, while Diao's chances of the same economic potential are much less. I suggest that the reason is not, essentially, qualitative, but racist in base.

As an indication of the changes in the art establishment in regards to race during the past two decades, I would like to note a discussion I had during the summer. I was talking to an artist about alternative spaces, funding, and affirmative action. At one point, we discussed the responsibility of the alternative spaces, since the funding for most of these spaces comes from foundations and government agencies, to make sure that there was minority representation. He said that this was difficult, because that would mean dictating to curators who should be in a show. I said that this was not dictating to curators, but making sure that possibilities for minority artists remained open. The issue is the responsibility of

public funding; acceptance of public funding means that the artist or the organization is accepting the mandate of public agencies to equal legal representation. Also being accepted is accountability to the public agencies for any statement made with public funds. For some reason, we wound up discussing the incident of "The Nigger Drawings"* at Artists Space in New York City. He felt the brouhaha over "The Nigger Drawings" was very unfair, and that the black artists who protested the show were being opportunistic. He also felt that Helene Winer and the administrative staff of Artists Space were unfairly accused of insensitivity to racial issues by allowing a white artist to exploit the term "nigger" in relation to an exhibition being sponsored by Artists Space. This artist suggested that artists and administrators such as Howardina Pindell, Lowery Sims, and Linda Goode-Bryant were exploiting the situation, in order to gain greater renown in the art world. Winer and those administrators of alternative spaces since then, he claimed, have been hampered by the idea of accountability. We discussed the direction (or lack thereof) of Artists Space in the past decade, a situation which he felt was due to the vigilance enforced by public accountability, which he viewed as congruent with censorship.

In a related incident, The Wooster Group presented *Route 1 & 9* in 1983. This piece included a segment which involved the performers (who were white) in blackface, exhibiting behavior which can only be considered stereotypical. The piece attracted a great deal of controversy at the time, with accusations of racism being made. The play had white actors in blackface and body paint enacting the most extreme negative racial stereotypes presented without self-reflexive analysis. The defense of the piece stated that The Wooster Group was only being honestly reflective, and that any attempt to have the piece amended would be censorship. In addition, a defense was made that public funding should not bow to community pressures, because the suggestion was made that the piece should not be supported by funds from The National Endowment for the Arts and The New York State Council on the Arts. However, the controversy did cause a decrease in funding from governmental agencies for the 1983-84 season. *Route 1 & 9* has remained in the repertory of The Wooster Group, and, after the initial decrease in funding, The Wooster Group's funding was not just restored to the level prior to 1983, but increased annually over the past three years. One reason for the increase was the budget to tour the repertory: *Route 1 & 9*, without amendment or even an explanatory program note, has now been shown throughout the United States and Europe.

When media arts departments were established in major American uni-

*The Nigger Drawings" was the title of a show at Artists Space in 1978 of (innocuous) abstractions by Donald Newman.

versities in the 1970s, there were inquiries to many artists to join the faculties. Obviously, one person who should logically have been invited to teach video art was Nam June Paik. Negotiating with several American universities in regards to teaching, Paik decided to investigate the pay scale for comparable positions. By the 1970s, many artists, such as Allan Kaprow, Ed Emshwiller, and Robert Morris, were involved in teaching. In his negotiations, Paik asked for a contract with comparable salary and benefits. Paik found that the American universities were unwilling to match the contract conditions which had been accorded to other (white) artists. Paik's credentials, both as an artist and as an academic, were comparable to his white colleagues. Paik was not asking for special dispensation: he was asking for parity. But no American university was willing to grant that. For more than a decade, Paik has been teaching at the University of Munich.

To state that these examples bespeak a racist bias is the kind of statement that minority artists are not supposed to make. Minority artists are always in a bind: if complaints are made, we are made to seem irrational, ungrateful, irresponsible. We should not bring these matters up. (The reason we should not bring these matters up is that the establishment always holds out the hope that an exception will be made in our case. That, in fact, we will be the token selected to participate fully within the arena of the art establishment.) As I write, there has been much advance comment on the exhibition "Committed to Print" at The Museum of Modern Art. This comprehensive survey of recent printmaking is one which has been studiously integrated, so that minority artists and women artists are represented along with the established white male artists. The fact of the exhibition being integrated is one seen to be of great import. But that is the problem: the exhibition should not be so anomalous. Integrated survey exhibitions should be par for the course in the art world. But this is not the case. So minority artists are left in the situation of having few alternatives to the art establishment, no matter what their work. Yet most Asian-American artists I know have studied art in the American universities. The agenda of contemporary art, which is taught at most universities and art schools, is one which is familiar to most Asian-American artists. Issues of abstraction, of figuration, of originality and appropriation, are issues with which most Asian-American artists are familiar. Few Asian-American artists work in a way which can be characterized as ethnic; rather, their art reflects an awareness of the mainstream issues of contemporary art. Yet, within a few years of working outside the academic environment, most of these artists find themselves having a problem sustaining a mainstream career; often, when these artists are included in exhibitions, those exhibitions stress the ethnic identities of the artists. The art world, so tied to an ideology of a market economy, reflects

the sociopolitical consciousness of that ideology. And that ideology maintains a hierarchy of stratification, with minority artists lacking a definable place within the structure. For this reason, minority artists must accede to the possibility of alternative systems, specifically institutional.

I should admit that, when I began writing this essay, I worried about the specificity of the examples. Quite frankly: was there a way to generalize, so that the names would not have to be included? I was worried about the proprieties. But that is exactly what the powers-that-be count on. Years ago, when I was in high school (I went to New York's High School of Music and Art), I was transferred from one art class (a graphics and printmaking class) to another (oil painting class). Now, this transfer came a month after the term began. I had already spent more than \$50 on supplies for the printmaking class, and I had been planning on certain projects. The whole transfer seemed totally arbitrary, especially since the term was already in its third week. So I went to my guidance counselor to complain, and she was amazed that I was complaining. Since I had already bought all the supplies for one course, I wanted to know how I was supposed to pay for the supplies I would need for the other course. As the term was already underway, I wanted to know why I was selected to be transferred. The guidance counselor replied that the class had 33 students, and the class really should only have 32, so one student had to be transferred. So I wanted to know why I was the one to be transferred. Alphabetically, I was not at the beginning, nor was I at the end. Finally, she admitted that I was transferred because I was assumed to be the one student who would obey without arguing. By that point, I was so angry that I yelled, "What the fuck do you mean, I would obey?" And she glared at me, and said, "How dare you say that to me, you, a nice Chinese boy!" In short, since I was the one Asian-American in the class, I was assumed to be a dutiful, obedient, docile person. How the hell do you argue with that? So much of the interaction of Asian-American artists with the mainstream of the art world seems to be based on a similar idea. The difficulty of assertion in the context of an assumed effacement is always part of the context of Asian-American artists.

This is not the case with other minority artists. That is why there has always been such strife in the relationship between other minority artists and the art establishment. The most striking example of this strife is the case of the graffiti artists. The fashionability of the graffiti artists had the art establishment making attempts to convert the graffiti artists to marketable status. However, soon the interactions between the art establishment and the graffiti artists became problematic, especially when the artists were introduced in the European context. Often, the actions of the artists were deemed inappropriate, outrageous, improper. The comedy of the situation came from the fact that class distinctions, implicit in many

art world interactions, became explicit. Within the operation of a postmodern aesthetic, the graffiti artists were able to command an equality of attention. There was always the element of discomfort with this exchange, and the vagaries of fashion enabled the art establishment to eliminate the problematic by a curtailment of acknowledgement. In recent months, a number of articles have appeared discussing the abridgement of the art commerce on the Lower East Side of New York City; many have mentioned the difficulties of the continued market value of the graffiti artists. The racial implications of the situation need not be hammered: the walls have been built to silence a problematic minority.

This is striking in the context of recent events in the art world. The arrogance and the impropriety which have been labelled as problematic for the graffiti artists can also be seen in the behavior of such other prominent artists as Robert Longo and Julian Schnabel. Why is it wrong for minority artists to assume the same stance of egocentricity? I would suggest that the egocentricity displayed by the graffiti artists challenged the ethnocentricity of the white art establishment.

The problem of tokenism is always present in the acknowledgement of minority artists, and, with tokenism, the situation of the fad, the trend, the fashion. In addition, there is the situation wherein one disenfranchised group is used as the token of pluralism, in order to prevent other disenfranchised groups from demanding parity.

I find that the writings of many critics who discuss postmodernism is curiously slanted. In the writings of Hal Foster, Craig Owens, Benjamin Buchloh, Rosalind Krauss, Brian Wallis, there is an assessment of the ideology of postmodernism as the critique of the sovereignty of the hegemony of Western European culture and its institutionalized aesthetic of the masterpiece. For this reason, there is an insistence on the copy, the appropriated image, the pastiche. Yet, within their agendas, there is rarely a mention of work done beyond the limits of white European-based, ethnocentric culture. When Owens, Buchloh, and Wallis mention alternative perspectives, their reference tends to be to the work of white women artists. There is rarely any mention of work by non-white artists, nor by non-white women artists. In Buchloh's essay "Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art" (in *Artforum*, September 1982) and in Owen's essay "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism" (in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, 1983), a certain aesthetic is defined through the work of a number of women artists such as Cindy Sherman, Dara Birnbaum, Louise Lawler, Martha Rosler, and Barbara Kruger. Yet non-white women using similar strategies (and for aesthetic purposes congruent with those of the white women cited) are never mentioned or alluded to or acknowledged. Two artists whose work would fit into those characterizations (and whose work was available in 1982) are Janet

Henry and Yong Soon Min and there are, of course, many others. Yet the work of these women remains outside the parameters of the discourse on the aesthetic of the "other" as defined in these discussions of postmodernism.

I do not want to set up an antagonism between feminists and minorities. Divisiveness is exactly the situation being set up by so much of the art establishment. The attempt to aggrandize the self so that the heroic stance is synonymous with the extremities of egocentricity is part of the pathology of much recent art commerce. Careerist behavior patterns have become part of the social intercourse of the art world. Trying to line up exhibitions, trying to line up reviews, trying to line up collectors: people no longer go to parties, people go to work a room. But if pluralism is being advocated, then we have the right to point out that pluralism is yet another exclusionary tactic. During the 1960s and 1970s, so much of the aesthetic of the avant-garde attempted to question the ideology behind aesthetics. We have seen how much that ideology centers on the definition of traditional sexual roles, thus the examples of Schnabel, Salle, and Longo as male artists living out the role of the embattled male egotist as defined by the Abstract Expressionists. That the ideology behind their work is reactionary need not be explained once again. But we can ask that any advocacy of pluralism remain open to any and all subversions of sexism, classism, and racism. We can ask that the rhetoric of cultural difference actually admit those of different cultures. At a time when reactionary values threaten to regain cultural ascendancy, we can ask that any theory of culture difference be vigilant about the qualifications and the exclusions within that theory. If aesthetics remain a function of the imaginative capabilities of mind, we can ask for open minds as opposed to closed minds. Although aesthetics are located in an imaginative realm, aesthetics reflect attitudes grounded in the realities of ethics, sociology, politics, economics, and psychology. When we see that aesthetics are being used to continue attitudes of sexism, classism, and racism, we have the right to point out the problematic we encounter. I should note that the minority can only propose; the majority must allow for accommodation. The minority can only suggest, then it is up to the majority to do something about the situation. But if the majority fails to recognize the exclusionary tactics now being practiced, then the realm of aesthetics is no longer imaginary, it is downright pathological.

Get real!

WHAT IS DIVIDED?

CHARLES BERNSTEIN

After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism
by Andreas Huyssen (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987)

After the Great Divide is one of the more useful books to recently appear on the subject of postmodernism. But, like so much of the debate surrounding this misunderstood — and perhaps not understandable — term, Andreas Huyssen hinges his remarks on a highly contestable definition of “modernism.”*

For Huyssen, postmodernism is characterized by the breakdown in the distinction between “high art” and popular culture (which he sees as a repudiation of the purism of modernism) and by a loss of faith in the power of avant-garde art (and more generally *modernization*) to bring about a better future through technology. Huyssen, however, is too ready to accept Peter Burger’s distinction between modernism and the “historical avant-garde” (Dada, early surrealism, the post-revolutionary Russian avant-garde), which in practice are so intricately intertwined as to defy strict separation. (See Burger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, tr. Michael Shaw [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984].)

In Burger’s terms, the avant-garde’s project was to disrupt the norms of bourgeois “institution art” (including those reflected in modernism) by breaking down the distinction between art and life through the embracing of technology and progress. In contrast, modernism attempted to keep art and life separate, and, through radical development of the autonomy of the art object, create new ways of “representing” and producing meanings — essentially extending the project of late nineteenth century aestheticism (art for art’s sake, “pure” art). Modernism, in this account, posed no obstacle to its elevation to the status of “institution art.”

Burger’s schema is reductive since it equates modernism with its critical *reception* by, for example, some “formalist” criticism. Indeed, from a formalist perspective, *modernism* was the embodiment of the Hegelian movement of art’s “advance.” In this sense, *progress* was a common agenda of some avant-garde and modernist theory. But that is not all: many modernist/avant-garde *artists* have rejected or had no in-

*This review is an extension of my essay “In the Middle of Modernism in the Middle of Capitalism on the Outskirts of New York,” which appeared in *Socialist Review* No. 96 (1987).

terest in “progress.” Gertrude Stein, for instance, perhaps English literature’s most radical theorist of modernism, spoke of contemporaneity not progress. Burger’s “theory” finally collapses when you allow that regardless of what individual artists or theorists have written about progress or **disruption** in avant-garde and modernist works, the *works themselves* often tell a quite different story; at minimum, many can be usefully interpreted without reference to their putative positions on these issues. Indeed, a central modernist project was the disruption of habitual patterns of thought and perception — just the patterns constantly being reinscribed by the culture industry. In this light, the avant-garde and modernism are fractions of the same dialectical movement.

It is just the dizzying undecidability of distinctions like avant-garde *versus* modernism that makes discussions of postmodernism so frustrating. The labels constantly disintegrate into each other and seem to prove their opposite. Huyssen cannot shore his terms against this tide.

Huyssen sees the American Pop, Beat, and “alternative” art of the 60s (his examples range from Cage to Ginsberg and Burroughs and Kerouac to Warhol and Johns) as the first stage of postmodernism since all this work breaks with modernism in three ways that echo the strategies of the historical avant-garde: 60s postmodernism blurs the distinctions between high art and popular culture, it makes iconoclastic attacks on institutional art, and it possesses a “technological optimism.” “Perhaps for the first time in American culture,” Huyssen says, “an avant-garde revolt against a tradition of high art and what was perceived as its hegemonic role made sense” [p. 103, italics added].

These generalizations break down on close inspection, especially if the different media are considered separately. Warhol has always aspired to represent the culture industry while assuming, rather than contesting, the mantle of institution art; and he is in no way “optimistic”, technologically or otherwise, given his dystopian vision of the total reach of commodification. Burroughs is among the most technologically pessimistic writers of the century. Cage and Schoenberg share a highly formal sense of musical structure that suggests as many continuities between them as discontinuities; as a result of their formal investigations, both have been foolishly attacked, but with equal vehemence, for their inaccessibility and for their rejection of the formally conventional features of popular culture. Johns “aestheticized” popular iconography into blue-chip high-art works that were almost immediately successful in the market and, soon after, as institution art (which is not to say that his work was in any sense “undeserving” of its success, just that it cannot be used as an example of work that posed greater obstacles to becoming institution art than the “modernist” work that immediately preceded it).

In contrast, the ascent to institution art of the abstract expression-

ists, and other American modernists of the 1950s, was *slower and more militantly opposed*, and a number of the artists were more iconoclastically anti-institution art, than several of Huyssen's 60s post-modernists. In any case, the whole edifice falls apart if you don't buy the distinction between avant-garde and modernism since the supposed revolt represented by what Huyssen calls "avantgarde Pop" was not necessarily against modernism, *per se*, but against specific, and often radically reductive, critical mappings of modernist art that have insisted on the foundational importance of this distinction. To argue, as Huyssen does, that Pop art was more avant-garde than abstract expressionism and to make this a basis for "postmodernism" is not only unconvincing, it empties the aesthetic content from particular works in a grand sweep of cultural criticism. Furthermore, it ignores the socioeconomic analysis that would see Pop less as a revolt against a sanctified modernism than as a necessary new fashion or trend required to keep the art market productive. (No general conclusions about the *value* of an artwork can be drawn from its commercial success or failure; indeed, highly contestatory works may gain wide public — or commercial — credence without losing their oppositional force, or they may not. Yet this type of generalizing is encouraged by Huyssen's analysis.)

Huyssen is quick to point out that the distinction between avant-garde and modernism makes more sense from a European perspective than from an American one; but this is because he believes that, until the 60s, American high art was not firmly entrenched enough to require an avant-garde. This is a problematic reading of the history of American culture and especially egregious in terms of literature, which is often Huyssen's specific field of reference. It's hard not to think of many of the American modernist poets, such as Williams, Pound, Riding, Stein, Zukofsky, or Oppen as not being consciously in opposition to an entrenched literary establishment. In contrast to Huyssen's account, the "avant-garde" is perhaps best understood as being variously constituted by a fusion of one of a number of political and social aspirations found *within* modernist art — socialist, utopian, anarchist, conservative, fascist. It also needs to be emphasized that Burger's "historical avant-garde" is an odd lot of individuals and groups who share much less than the label suggests: these movements must be considered within their specific geographic and sociopolitical contexts, else neofascist Italians fetishizing machines are equated with French leftists fascinated by the unconscious. Worse, German artists' attitudes about the mass culture of Weimar end up being equated with the aspirations of Russian artists for a *new* socialist culture, which are then equated with Pop's fascination with American popular culture —

as if mass culture was a unitary phenomenon.

Yet it is striking that in the most penetrating chapter in his book, "Adorno in Reverse," Huyssen makes a convincing case that Adorno's "modernism" can only be understood as a *fusion* of avant-garde and modernist concerns. Adorno advocated modernism on the political/ideological ground that the autonomous artwork was able to avoid the grip of administered culture. For Adorno, the political imperative was to insist that art and mass culture be kept separate: a concern that is no less relevant in 1987 of Philip Johnson and *Amerika* than it was in 1937 of Albert Speer and Leni Riefenstahl. For art can be political by articulating something broken off from — for example — the postmodern nightmare Fredric Jameson depicts.** Alternatives can, and must, be envisioned and enacted. Art is never "pure" in the sense of escaping the ideological. Rather, art may provide different approaches to representing or critiquing the ideological. In this context, Huyssen valuably suggests that Adorno's most crucial point is that the social realm is always the subject of art, whether explicitly or implicitly.

**See his "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Postmodernism," in *New Left Review* 146 (1984); an earlier version of this article is printed in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, ed. Hal Foster.

STELLA, THE STAR — NO. 2

CORINNE ROBINS

Up close, slivery aluminum. Sequins glitter, colors splash. Up close, why is ornament heartless, like the architectural curve that can and will bend all ways? The beginning, lines and straight diagonals, green piano keys to be found summoning loss. Loss of Russian constructivists in beginnings made for lost Polish synagogues of faded photographs. Complex wooden buildings made for prayer. And now, what we see is more, what we get less as Frank Stella the Star trusts only what escapes his hand, aiming to rebuild the color flash of bird and motor car.

What's enough? A French curve in play of Mary or Marilyn and sexier slithering down a painting runway? At MoMA, the world of goddesses go 'round. You want a tap dance to mean more than sound and light and grace? Down below ground Stella dances. Above, Matisse's gold fish swim and mean.

Distance. Art to touch the eye, which is the mind, fingers restless. I see Stella better from the hall, while on Broadway, the New Museum has Mendieta's other evidence. Ana's artist fingers draw paths of blood down paper. The Carribean, the African, the borrowed underworld throbs through Matisse and Picasso and the etched magnesium of Stella graffiti. She — the night side, the 'passed away' deaths and murders of more than slaughtered trees. And meanwhile, we owe the end of the line Rockefeller, Michael, who traded life for art, those rooms of primitive art at the Met. . . Michael who stole one artifact too many because in art, in the West, in the now, we have to have it.

Stella's Brazilian birds and Mendieta's *siluetas*, visual sound that takes the measure of breath. Twentieth-century splendor — the hand print on mud or magnesium, the artist's only 'message' whatever writers say. Prayer animals in caves, Stonehenge astronomy, and now the art exchange. 57 million for Van Gogh's madness lied about in faded reproduction. What was it he saw even as the paint cracks? No matter. Somewhere a light goes on, and the dream record continues.

THE POETICS OF BASKETRY: ART IN A TRIBAL CONTEXT

DAVID M. GUSS

The following selections were excerpted from *To Weave and Sing: Art, Symbol, and Narrative in the South American Rainforest*. Forthcoming from the University of California Press in February 1989, this work is the result of nearly ten years of research with the Yekuana Indians of the Upper Orinoco area of Venezuela. A Carib-speaking group, these Indians live in villages of from 60-150 inhabitants, which are dotted throughout Ithuna or the "Headwater Place," their nearly inaccessible homeland in the rapids-filled Guiana highland jungle. While my original work with the Yekuana was inspired by the discovery of their creation epic (*Watunna: An Orinoco Creation Cycle*, translated and edited by David M. Guss, North Point Press, 1980), subsequent trips focused more on non-narrative art forms, particularly that of basketry. But as the Yekuana soon taught me, it made little difference at what point one entered their culture. For theirs was truly a mutually reflective universe in which every moment was filled with the same possibilities of illumination as any other. Each activity, whether ritual or material, was determined by the same underlying configuration of symbols. Thus whatever an action's external form or particular function, it was involved in the same dialogue as the rest of the culture, communicating the same essential messages and meanings. To weave a basket, therefore, was to tell a story, just as it was to make a canoe, to prepare barbasco, to build a house, to clear a house, to give birth, to die.

The classic distinction between form and content which has come to dominate so much of the discussion of the modern work of art quickly disintegrates as one approaches the creations of those living within the framework of a traditional tribal society. The simple dichotomy between the arrangement of materials and the meaning these arrangements convey is undermined by a set of new considerations which the contemporary work of art no longer chooses to address. Dimensions long proscribed by the modernist doctrine of "art for art's sake" resurface as critical elements in the comprehension of any objects made within the context of a traditional society. The most obvious of these "rediscovered" dimensions is that of function, the utilitarian or socioeconomic role that is as important an ingredient to an artifact as any other. Ironically, it is usually this element which has dominated the appreciation of "primitive" art. Thus, while Westerners may use the presence of function to discredit the validity of a work of art in their own culture, it remains the primary lens through which they examine the art of others. Unfortunately, these examinations rarely illuminate the expressive genius of a work of art but rather obscure it. Yet in the end, the functional qualities of an aesthetic object should conform to the same structure of meaning that determines all its other aspects, and therefore

possess the same power to reveal it. This is also true of the materials, which rather than forming a single counterpoint to the intelligible manner in which they are arranged, participate in an independent but parallel system of expression.

Unlike the work of art in our own society, that of the tribal artist tends to be created in all of its parts. One does not purchase prepared materials such as canvas and paint, film or instruments; one goes out and makes them. In this sense, there is no aspect of the work of art that does not go through some process of creative transformation. In modernist aesthetics, when an artist prepares his/her own materials the work is usually associated with craft, a somewhat pejorative term used to indicate the existence of a functional value. It is what is commonly known as "applied art" as contrasted to either "pure" or "fine art." Underlying this distinction is the notion that only an art released from the formal considerations of function can be truly individual and expressive. Yet in the tribal work of art, both function and material are essential modes of expression. Each is a fully created entity constellated around its own set of symbols. The various elements in the completed work therefore are not subordinated to one another in a hierarchy of ideas which are ultimately distilled as content, but share in the independent creation of meaning. Like the entire culture it reproduces, the work of art is the union of a multifaceted set of interlocking statements, each reinforcing and mirroring the other.

The twill basketry of the Yekuana provides an excellent example of such diffusion of meaning throughout a work of "primitive art." The graphic elements in these baskets represent a highly charged and complex set of symbols. Through an analysis of their names, origins, and shapes, they have been seen to reproduce and resolve the most difficult conflicts confronting the life of every Yekuana. For those who weave and use them daily, these designs explore the very nature of reality. Yet they are not the only elements in the baskets to do so. Beliefs surrounding the gathering and preparation of materials provide a complementary set of symbols to support those communicated by the designs. In fact, the structural symmetry between these two sets is so perfect that the form and content, or at least the technical and the graphic, become virtually synonymous.

* * *

While the Yekuana, like many tribal peoples, have no fixed category corresponding to the Western concept of "art," they do distinguish between objects manufactured within the guidelines of traditional design and those that simply arrive without any cultural transformation or intent. *Tidi'uma*, from the verb *tidi*, "to make," are the collective artifacts of the culture, the sum total of everything one must learn to make in order to be considered a Yekuana. These are the essential items, from canoes and graters to houses and baskets, the things that not only distinguish the Yekuana as a society

but incorporate the symbols that allow them to survive. *Mesoma*, on the other hand, is simply "stuff," the undifferentiated mass of goods which the Yekuana have acquired through either trade or chance. Often referred to by the Spanish term *coroto*, these objects, such as tin cans and plastic buckets, have none of the magical power or symbolic meaning associated with *tidi'uma*. And though a person may occasionally try to disguise a commercially manufactured object with a layer of skillfully applied body paint, *mesoma* remains a synonym for any insipid or alien object.

For the Yekuana, the distinction between *tidi'uma* and *mesoma* is an important one, as it recognizes culture as something to be made. Unlike the prefabricated *mesoma* that arrives from the outside lacking either significance or resonance, the objects classified under the term *tidi'uma* are all handmade. They represent not only the collective resources of the culture but also a conviction that culture is something to be created daily by every member. Through the complex arrangement of symbolic elements incorporated into the manufacture, design, and use of each one of these objects, *tidi'uma* are able to take on a metaphoric significance that far outweighs their functional value. The semiotic content of every artifact demands that the maker participate in a metaphysical dialogue, often articulated with no more than his hands. Implicit in the growth of every individual as a useful member of society, therefore, is the development of his intellectual capacity. For in learning how to make the various objects required for survival, one is simultaneously initiated into the arrangements underlying the organization of the society as a whole. Just as ritual actions may be said to necessarily accompany all material ones, the symbols incorporated into the manufacture of all *tidi'uma* require that every functional design participate in a greater cosmic one. Hence, to become a mature Yekuana is not only to develop the physical skills demanded of one's gender, but also the spiritual awareness that the preparation of these goods imparts. In a society that has no special category for a work of "art," there can be no object that is not one. Or, put another way, to become a true Yekuana is to become an artist.

As if to acknowledge the close relation between technical and esoteric skills, the Yekuana often speak of the development of manual expertise as analogically indicative of other more intangible qualities. The fact that those who create the most skillfully crafted objects are also the most ritually knowledgeable members of the community is a truism every Yekuana recognizes. In order to manufacture even the simplest objects of everyday use, the maker will need to be familiar with the symbolic arrangements necessary to their completion. As these objects become more complicated, so too must the esoteric knowledge incorporated into their design. Of all the artifacts the Yekuana manufacture, no other demonstrates this simultaneously incremental development of technical and rit-

ual competence as does basketry. The most pervasive of all Yekuana art forms, basketry may not only be used to chart the growth of an individual but of an entire community as well. A shibboleth of tribal identity, the Yekuana state that "a person who does not make baskets is just like a Criollo," and emphasize that the authenticity or "Yekuananess" of other villages may be judged by the quality of their weavings.

* * *

Although this tradition of twill-plaited basketry finds one of its most perfect expressions in the work of the Yekuana, it is in no way unique to them. It is a form that has flourished throughout South America, with examples found from coastal Peru to Panama. Among the Carib, Arawak, and Tukanoan groups of the Guianas and Upper Amazon, where it is probable this tradition became most highly developed, some form of bichromatic plaited basketry was at one time nearly universal. Yet, despite such historical importance, there are almost no studies of it, a situation which, in most cases, is now too late to remedy. For ironically, despite Koch-Grunberg's 1911 warning that "the craft which belongs to the entire Yekuana tribe is beginning to disappear more and more due to a continually expanding relation with the whites",¹ the Yekuana remain one of the few groups where this sophisticated art form can still be fully appreciated.

One study which was conducted was that of Paul Henley and Marie-Claude Mattei-Muller carried out during the 1970s among the Yekuana's distant neighbors to the north, the Panare. A Carib-speaking tribe like the Yekuana, the Panare never developed as complex a tradition of bichromatic plaited weaving. While they did have a traditional serving tray, it was a combination of one of three simple weave patterns with a variable chromatic sequence wherein colored elements were inserted discontinuously to give the illusion of a more diversified design. Then, in 1964, a Protestant missionary introduced the Yekuana technique of basketmaking to them as a means of producing trade items to supplement their economy.

After several years of experimentation with this new form of basketry, the Panare began to develop a unique style of their own. While it respected many of the techniques adopted from the Yekuana — the manner of weaving complex patterns from continuously-inserted colored elements, the use of finer materials, a more sophisticated finishing band — it used them in new ways. It rejected the geometric abstraction so dominant in Yekuana basketry and replaced it with newly created graphic forms. More naturalistic than the "painted" *waja* of the Yekuana, these new Panare baskets attempted to depict everything from tapir and dogs to trucks and radios. In order to accomplish this, the Panare had to violate the "technical conventions" implicit in bichromatic plaited basketry.

Whereas the Yekuana had limited the number of warp elements that could be crossed over by those of the weft to either three or five, the Panare now extended this number to as many as the image demanded. By relaxing this rule, the medium was now capable of incorporating whatever design the Panare wished to weave. It meant, however, that the baskets were no longer strong enough to be used. They were reduced to pure "aesthetic" objects — a type of hybrid of *mesoma* and *tidi'uma* — with no cultural value beyond a commercial one.

Of course, as Henley and Mattei-Muller point out, these baskets were never meant to be anything more to the Panare than trade items. Liberated from both functional demand and symbolic inhibition, the Panare were free to experiment in any way they liked. They were also encouraged to do so by the criollo dealers trading for their work:

These dealers frequently urge the Panare to make the graphic figures of their guapawork as naturalistic and anecdotal as possible and to include as many animal figures as they can. In order to comply with this request the Panare are obliged to circumvent technical conventions.²

Unfortunately, Henley and Mattei-Muller do not investigate the motivation behind such anti-abstractionism, which also plagues the Yekuana in their commercial dealings; is it the result of aesthetic conservatism among Westerners or simply a ruse by which dealers insure the authentic "Indian-ness" of their products? "Preliterate" peoples, after all, are not supposed to think in abstractions, a fact which should be reflected in the concrete images of their art — frogs, tapir, jaguars, the jungle. But such prejudices are not only self-fulfilling, they are also destructive. As already noted, the Panare acquiescence to this commercial pressure coupled with the lack of restraints of either use or tradition produced what in a tribal society is a complete anomaly: an objet d'art devoid of any symbolic meaning or function. Ironically, Henley and Mattei-Muller greet this development as a significant cultural triumph, claiming that through the transcendence of the "technical limitations" of plaited basketry, the Panare have "developed a more versatile medium of plastic expression than any they previously possessed." They appear to share in the view that greater representation means greater art, especially when it is done in a medium that resists anything but "angular and linear graphic forms." Convinced that the Panare attach no serious interpretation to any geometric design, Henley and Mattei-Muller conclude that the real problem is with the form itself:

Although the figures of the traditional Panare style of guapawork may to a limited extent be the consequence of a prior intention on the part of the artisan to represent specific phenomena and not merely *post hoc* rationalizations, the representational potential of traditional Panare guapawork is highly circumscribed by the fact that only angular and

linear forms are possible due to the technical limitations of the style. These forms rarely permit holistic representation. When meanings are attached to traditional Panare figures, the referents are frequently reptiles or fish, not because these classes of animal have any special significance for the Panare but rather because their body markings or body surface textures lend themselves to representation by means of angular and linear graphic forms.³

While the introduction of Yekuana basketry permitted the Panare to resolve such problems of meaning and form, it did so in a way the Yekuana could never contemplate. Not only are the resulting constructions too weak to be of any utilitarian value, but in destroying the relation between technique and image they rupture the entire matrix of meaning within which the baskets function. To the Yekuana the concept of "transcending the technical limitations" is irrelevant, as the success of a work of art is in the integration of every aspect, wherein no part dominates and none is wasted. This perfect balance between content and form, technique and image, function and material, is what defines a Yekuana basket — it is the language by which it articulates its message. To disturb these relationships would be to undermine the overall meaning of the work, to create a mutant form halfway between a basket and something else. While one might praise the single element now dominant, the ability to comprehend the work as an expression of the whole would be forever lost.

* * *

As one begins to observe, the problem of understanding Yekuana basketry is the problem of understanding traditional art forms within the framework of small, tribal societies in general. Unlike the works of contemporary Western artists, those produced by the Yekuana are not so easily dismissed by a formalist discussion. Although the affective properties of shape, color, and tension are of course issues, they diminish in importance as one begins to explore the remarkable resonance implicit in every aspect of the work. At the same time, a functionalist approach, to which so much of "primitive art" has been reduced, captures only a fraction of the power and meaning of the objects that regularly resist classification. Commenting on this same problem, Clifford Geertz writes that the study of these art forms must first uncover "the distinctive sensibility" out of which they grow:

This realization, that to study an art form is to explore a sensibility, that such a sensibility is essentially a collective formation, and that the foundations of such a formation are as wide as social existence and as deep, leads away not only from the view that aesthetic power is a grandiloquence for the pleasures of craft. It leads away also from the so-called functionalist view that has most often been opposed to it: that is, that works of art are elaborate mechanisms for defining social relationships, sustaining social rules, and strengthening social values.⁴

By extending itself into every aspect of the culture, the "primitive" work of art succeeds in recreating it, justifying Geertz's conclusion that "a theory of art is at the same time a theory of culture, not an autonomous enterprise."⁵ Such a conclusion naturally demands that all analyses recognize the greater dimensionality of this work. While ignoring neither the formalist nor functionalist concerns, the main focus must be on the "total system of symbols and meanings"⁶ that leads back to the society that produced it and which it, in turn, reproduces. For ultimately the real question is not *what* art means but *how*. In studying the Yekuana baskets this question cannot be fully answered until each of the converging symbolic systems is identified and analyzed. These include the narrative element — the stories the Yekuana tell concerning the baskets and other artifacts. Running like a subtext through each of the baskets' different features, these tales and chants provide us with the closest approximation we have to a native exegesis of these phenomena. Of course, the most striking element to be examined is that of the graphic designs woven into the surface of the baskets. Yet no less important is the technology of the baskets. Organized around the gathering, preparation, and weaving of the various basketry materials, these aspects comprise a separate, but complementary set of symbols to be studied. Finally, there is the question of the basket's use, its function in daily life, the rituals that permit it, the prohibitions that prevent it. Only when all of these elements have been considered — the narrative, graphic, technical, and functional — can the baskets be viewed in their true cultural context. Only then can one begin to recognize the same configuration of symbols constellated around such other cultural forms as the house, garden, and dress. By replicating the organization of symbols articulated in these and other forms, the baskets provide yet another expression of the Yekuana conceptualization of the universe. As such, one might say the ultimate subject matter of the baskets is culture itself. For like "all things made" (*tidi'uma*), they are intended as portraits of the society that inspired them.

Notes

1. Theodor Koch-Grunberg, *Del Roraima al Orinoco*, (Caracas: Banco Centrale, 1982), vol. 3, p. 290.
2. Henley and Mattei-Muller, "Panare Basketry," *Antropologica*, 49, 1978, p. 101.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 95-96.
4. Geertz, "Art as a Cultural System," *Modern Language Notes*, 91, p. 1478.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 1488.
6. David M. Schneider, "Notes Towards a Theory of Culture," in *Meaning in Anthropology*, ed. Basso and Selby, (Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico, 1976), p. 208.

LETTER TO THE EDITORS

12/5/87

Hi Susan, Hi Mira:

This answers your letter of the other day. This is strictly off the cuff and I am going to go through item by item with the hope that you will understand me better that way. Meaning is a literary concept and can't be applied to (visual) art except as a gesture, pat or caress. Art is special modes of knowing which is not the same as meaning. Making art out of critical theories, current or otherwise, and can only be celebrated with tears. "... alternatives to ... meaning for their work" is already a critical theory. Right now the kind of art I am interested in making or seeing (being subjected to) is the kind that does not immediately generate a verbal analog. Is that a critical theory? Maybe I am sick and will get better.

For the present I can only wish you scads of luck and offer you some affection and respect.

Richard Artschwager

CONTRIBUTORS

CHARLES BERNSTEIN's most recent book is an essay-in-verse, *Artifice of Absorption* (Philadelphia: *Paper Air*). Sun & Moon Press published his collection of poems *The Sophist* last year.

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